Christian Community

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The Family Farm—New Center Of Controversy

By Shirley E. Greene

"The family farmer is the backbone of American democracy."

This sentiment has long been one of the assured items in the American's creed. Yet today, so fluid has our intellectual and cultural landscape become, even this well-known landmark is called sharply in question.

About a year ago the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture launched a Family Farm Policy Review. Its avowed purpose was to subject all policies and activities of the department to two simple tests: 1) Are we effectively serving the family farmer? 2) How could we serve the family farmer better?

I was closely in touch with this Review from its inception. Its motives, I believe, were sound and right although some unwise procedures were used. The Secretary of Agriculture, in fostering this Review, believed he was offering the public a quiet and relaxing alternative to the highly controversial Brannan Plan.

To his astonishment and that of many others, he quickly learned that the family farm is no longer non-controversial. The American Farm Bureau Federation lined up against the Review; the National Farmers Union in favor of it; and the National Grange somewhere in the middle. The battle was on.

Across the country it raged. The A.F.B.F.'s opposition centered principally on other issues than the family farm as such. Nevertheless a good deal was said, editorially and otherwise, in farm bureau circles about the Dept. of Agriculture trying to fasten "peasantry" on the American farmer. Secretary Brannan was accused of reviving an old-fashioned and outmoded notion that farming is "a way of life."

The power politics aspects aside, this controversy revealed a serious misunderstanding among farm leaders who should have known better as to the meaning of the term, "family farm." Opponents of the Review generally equated family farm with little farm, low-productivity farm, subsistence farm,—peasantry.

True, there are many American farm families struggling to make a living today on just such inadequate units. But this is not the family farm which is the backbone of our democracy nor is it, as a fair reading would quickly reveal, the kind of family farm the Policy Review was designed to perpetuate. Quite the contrary.

Farm Security Administration

In effect the Department was saying what both Protestant and Catholic rural leadership has been saying for years: The family farm which national policy and Christian conscience should support has to be efficient in production and sufficient in size to provide for the diligent farm family an adequate American level of living. On the other hand, it should be one on which the family makes most of the managerial decisions and does most of the work.

The family farm cannot be defined in acres. Its physical size will vary greatly according to various crops, soil conditions, climate, managerial ability of the operator, size of the family and other factors. There are, nevertheless, both upper and lower limits beyond which the family farm clearly disappears.

Two recent studies have helped us to identify those limits. They highlight, by contrast, the values which lead us to support the family farm as a major goal of American land policy. Reports from these two studies reveal the family farm under pressure,—pressure from below and pressure from above.

These reports, one from the staff of the Joint Congressional Committee on the Economic Report*, the other from the President's Commission on Migratory Labor†, give a broad picture of American farms in three tiers.

At the bottom are more than 2,000,000 low productivity, low income farms which produce less than 10 per cent by

value of the annual national crop.

In the middle are somewhat less than 3,000,000 substantial farms operated on a family basis and returning, at present farm prices, a fair income and level of living to the family. These farms account for 80 per cent of the annual national crop.

At the top are approximately 125,000 large-scale industrialized farms, employing the great majority of the nation's 1,000,000 migratory workers and producing 7 to 10 per cent of the annual national crop.

Although often called family farms, these low-income farms in the bottom tier may be more properly called "subsistence" farms, "marginal" farms, or in many cases "part-time" farms. From the Joint Committee's study, the following graphic picture of their condition may be drawn. They include:

1,000,000 full-time, able-bodied farm operators whose total value of farm production, including farm products used in the home, was under $1500 in 1944§. Average gross income for this group, $867.

600,000 full-time, able-bodied farm operators whose total value of farm production, including products used in the home, was between $1500 and $2500, in 1944.

400,000 part-time, able-bodied farm operators where the combined farm and non-farm income in 1944 was $2000 or less.

2,000,000 Total farm families.

The Joint Committee's study includes in its total picture of rural poverty also 1,500,000 rural non-farm families with annual incomes of less than $2000 as recently as 1948, and 1,200,000 hired wage workers in agriculture with 1949 average incomes of $980. Summarizing the wasted manpower involved in the under-employment of these 4,700,000 rural and farm workers, the study states:

"If the workers in these five groups of rural families could be employed at jobs where they would produce as much as the average worker on the medium-sized, commercial family farm or the average rural non-farm worker, the production and output of rural people would be increased 20 to 25 per cent. This is the equivalent of adding 2,500,000 workers to the total labor force." (Page 4, *Under-employment of Rural Families).*

At the other end of the scale, lies a narrow tier (two per cent of the nation's farms) which are clearly outsized. No better term has ever been coined for them than "factories-in-the-fields." They are, indeed, industrialized operations characterized by large capital investment, high risk factor, frequent separation of managerial function from both ownership and manual labor, employment on an impersonal basis of large quantities of wage labor.

They are food factories, their owners are industrial entrepreneurs and their laborers are industrial workers. They are distinctive among industrial operations because of the highly perishable character (in most instances) of their product and the highly seasonal nature of their labor requirements. They are distinguished also, to their shame, by the fact that their wage workers are specifically excluded from minimum wage legislation, workmen's compensation, old age and survivors insurance, National Labor Relations Act, child labor laws,—in short from virtually all the benefits and protections now normally accorded to industrial workers in America.

Average wages for this group in 1950 were 37 per cent of those received by other industrial workers. The President's Commission on Migratory Labor, reporting in 1950, pointed out both these inequitable working conditions and the tragic living conditions which result from migration, fragmentary employment and low wages. By all social indices,—housing, health, education, recreational and religious opportunities,—the million migratory workers and their families are one of America's most depressed and under-privileged groups.

Both the "Tobacco Road" farms at the bottom and the "Grapes of Wrath" farms at the top present a challenge and a threat to the family farm. Both threaten the family farm by the competition of their low-paid labor. The "big" operators threaten by concentrating more and more land in vast industrialized holdings. A new element in this picture emerges as food canning, freezing and processing companies now begin to buy and rent huge tracts to be farmed on a factory basis as their sources of raw supply.

The "little" farm pattern threatens further to invade legitimate family farm areas. High birth rates coupled with insufficient opportunities for out-migration cause constant sub-division of holdings. Faulty farm practices, due to ignorance and pressure of poverty, destroy the soil base for sound family enterprise.

The Land Tenure Committee of the Department of Town and Country Church, National Council of Churches, convened in 1948 a National Conference on "A Protestant Program for the Family Farm." Since that time, the committee has sponsored close to 100 county institutes on "The Church and the Family Farm" in all parts of the country. It is the considered conclusion of this committee, shared by most careful students of rural life, that under American conditions, the family farm is the agricultural pattern best designed to minister to the dignity of the person, the security of the family, the stability of the community and the strength of democratic forms of society.

The Council for Social Action of the Congregational Christian Churches has embodied these conclusions in an official policy statement on "Land Tenure and the Family Farm" which is available on request from the author of this article at Merom, Indiana. That statement, together with the studies cited herein are recommended as a basis for group study and discussion in your church.

The problem of land tenure, discussed here in American terms, is one of the major issues confronting the free world

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International Relations Letter

February 15, 1952

Death of a Missionary

Probably not many of you knew Dr. Henry G. Bennett, who died in an airplane crash in Iran late in December. He was the head of the Technical Cooperation Administration in the State Department. He and his wife and four of his associates died while making a tour of the Middle East on behalf of the Point IV program. Last November I met him and heard him speak in Washington. It seemed to me then that if Point IV developed in accordance with Henry Bennett's ideas we could all feel reassured and thankful. A competent administrator, he was, above all, a great human being. You should have heard him talk about the people in the underdeveloped areas! He saw the need in human terms. He knew what had to be done. A wonderful combination of down-to-earth realist and humanitarian! To read of his death in the newspapers was a personal shock and sorrow.

When the talk goes as if you couldn't trust anyone in government I think of men like Henry Bennett. When they would have us believe that government is always the enemy of personal freedom I remember men like Henry Bennett—who are agents of all of us, doing on our behalf what we cannot do as individuals or as private groups. Henry Bennett was a missionary in the great tradition. I, for one, am spurred to greater efforts on behalf of Point IV because he lived—and died.

One Way to Do It

Congratulations to the Social Action Committee in Central Church, Providence, R. I.! First they distributed literature on Point IV among members of the committee, so that each one would know what it's all about. Then they set up an open meeting, inviting everyone in the church to come. At this meeting several members of the committee gave short talks on different aspects of Point IV. That's probably much better than depending on an outside speaker. And it's something that almost every church could do. Why not try it?

Put It in a Prayer!

Did you ever try to put your thoughts about the cold war in a prayer? It isn't easy. Even if a prayer need not be all soft and mild, the fact remains that some of our habitual thoughts about Russia and about ourselves don't look right when you present them to the God of all men and all nations: If some of us prayed as we talk and think we would pray like this: "O God, thou knowest that we are full of goodwill and that our deeds are righteous. Thou knowest also that those who are against us are full of ill-will and that their deeds are evil." It just doesn't sound right. On the other hand—well, take the prayer a friend of mine wrote. It's full of repentance and humility. It confesses our "smug self-righteousness." That's a good note. But the prayer doesn't ring true. It sounds as if all the evil were in us of the West. How does a person talk to the great God about this tension and struggle—a person who knows that there *are* degrees of right and wrong, that the communists *are* terribly wrong at important points but that, also, we are not as good as we think we are? Try writing a prayer that isn't merely false humility and an abdication of moral judgment but that, at the same time, is not something you'd be ashamed to say before the face of the eternal Father of us all.

To Presidential Candidates

"Mr. ———, you want my support for the nomination by your party and then in the election. I'm interested in your views on many issues but there's one question that goes deep. Let me try to phrase it. Something like this: Does the fact that other nations need our help irritate you? Are you in the habit of saying that 'the U. S. can't support the whole world?' Do you wish we could pull out of the center of things and go our own way? I don't mean that the U. S. *can* support the whole world or that it would be good for the rest of the world if we could. But there's something in the way some Americans talk about other nations and their plight that sounds like a hankering for the old isolationism. They may deny they are isolationist but they certainly don't sound as if they had accepted the fact of interdependence or the fact that a rich and powerful nation has responsibilities that it can't shake off. I'm listening to your speeches for evidence that you wouldn't take a suspicious and niggardly attitude toward the U. N. If you were asked what you think of Point IV and you replied that we can't go on giving away millions, then I'd know that you don't understand Point IV, which would mean that you just don't like very much the idea of helping other peoples and don't care enough to take the trouble to find out what Point IV is. I'm listening to the sound and spirit of your words about our relationships with other nations. I won't vote for anybody for President who doesn't know that, economically, the world is one and that we have got to build the political institutions and further the cultural relationships that match our economic interdependence." That, it seems to me, is about what some of us might say to candidates for the leadership of our country.

That Reservoir of Goodwill

"A great reservoir of goodwill for the U. S."—that's what Wendell Willkie said he found on his trip around the world in 1942. Today? At least once each week you can find a new magazine article or newspaper story that tells about the emptying of the reservoir. England, France, India—go where you like, it's the same story. The U. S. is not popular. "In spite of all we've done?" Yes, and partly because of that. We are rich. Most other nations are poor. It requires great understanding and wisdom in the rich and real maturity in the poor to create a good relationship between them. Our churches ought to be in the forefront in the effort to help Americans appreciate the difficult role of other nations in the present situation. We could help to moderate that awful pride and self-satisfaction to which the powerful and prosperous are so prone.

Herman F. Reissig.

TWO ATTACKS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

The American people have given political expression to the requirements of love and justice, derived from the Christian tradition, at a number of significant points. Among them is the principle of taxation on the basis of ability to pay, of which the graduated income tax is an example; another is the recognition that the community should provide for the "general welfare"—the education of children, the advancement of the public health, and the protection of citizens against economic want.

Both of these established American policies are now under attack. For some time a movement has been under way to secure a constitutional amendment limiting the federal government's power of taxation to one-fourth of an individual's income. A number of states have succumbed to the campaign to petition Congress to enact such an amendment—which would lighten the tax burden of those in the upper income brackets and place an impossible burden on those in the lower and middle brackets. It would also deprive the latter groups of important social services as the federal financial structure is crippled. Purporting to be a reasonable limitation of the power of the government, this move is palpably a rejection of the principle that "to whom much is given, of him shall much be required."

A more recent effort is that of the United States Chamber of Commerce to discredit the whole concept of "welfare" and to sabotage the programs which have been created to further the security and health of our people. The December 21, 1951, issue of its organ, *Business Action,* presents the matter baldly. Lumping together payments *from all governmental sources, federal, state and local*—including public education, veterans' benefits, and public health program—it reports that during fiscal 1949-50 these reached the alarming total of $22,800,000,000, or one out of every three tax dollars. (Nothing is said of the $239 billion national income, of which this represents less than ten per cent!)

Although admitting that most of these programs are necessary and desirable and charging that the real evil is federal grasping for more control, *Business Action* does not suggest how transferring administration from one federal government to thousands of state and local governments would save the taxpayer's hard-earned dollars. The emotional treatment of the subject suggests that when in a two-page cartoon the sheet advocates "pruning" it really means *cutting down* the "welfare tree."

Despite references to man's "God-given" right to freedom, the blatant rejection of neighborly responsibility—except for sentimental charity or a grudging minimum of public assistance—reveals either ignorance or defiance of Christian ethical standards.

Readers are urged to spread the word to editors, clergymen, and the long suffering members of their service clubs. It is to be hoped that such persons—and the thousands of responsible business men whom the Chamber in no sense represents—will block this arrogant effort to subvert one of the fine fruits of American society.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Additional copies may be obtained for 2 cents each. Requests from Congregational Christians should be addressed to Ray Gibbons, Director, Council for Social Action, 289 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, New York. Requests by Evangelical and Reformed, and others, as well as news items and communications, should be addressed to the Editor, Huber F. Klemme, Commission on Christian Social Action, 2969 West 25th Street, Cleveland 13, Ohio

The Family Farm

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today. Land reform is rapidly becoming a central symbol of the aspiration of suppressed millions in the under-developed countries of the world. Communist propaganda headlines it on every continent. Unless America can present, by precept and by example, just and stable patterns of land holding to the world's agricultural populations, our position as champions of human freedom will stand in serious jeopardy.

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* *Under-employment of Rural Families,* Joint Committee Print, 82nd Congress, 1st Session. U. S. Gov't Printing Office, Washington, D. C.

† *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture,* U. S. Gov't Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 75c.

§ 1945 Census figures were the latest available at the time this study was made. The investigators point out that a general price rise of about 25 per cent in all farm prices and incomes has occurred since 1944. There is no assurance, but rather grave doubt, that that general percentage of rise prevailed among these lowest income groups.

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Churchmanship Emphasis To Follow Easter

The General Council of the Evangelical and Reformed Church at its February meeting gave approval to a post-Easter season of emphasis on Churchmanship. Presented as the joint proposal of the Commission on Evangelism and the Commission on Christian Social Action, the plan calls upon local churches of the denomination to enlist members old and new in observing six responsibilities of membership; viz., worship regularly, give generously, commune faithfully, learn continuously, serve willingly, and witness courageously.

It is suggested that these standards be promoted through special sermons, forums, study classes, and fellowship groups.

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Oppose UMT

The Council for Social Action of the Congregational Christian Churches at its midwinter meeting adopted a statement opposing the enactment of universal military training as a permanent peacetime policy.

Both the General Board of the National Council of Churches and the Commission on Christian Social Action have adopted similar statements. As committee hearings conclude, it is important for opponents of this measure to encourage their Congressmen to stand firm against any effort to "jump the gun" by putting "voluntary" UMT into effect during the present emergency.